

Everyone loves select committees these days. But have they really changed?

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The Wright reforms have been widely credited with reinvigorating select committees. **Stephen Bates, Mark Goodwin (University of Birmingham) and Steve McKay (University of Lincoln)** take issue with this assumption. They found the reforms have made little or no difference to MP turnover and attendance, which are driven by the parliamentary cycle. When MPs are jostling for payroll vote positions and trying to keep up with constituency duties and votes in the Chamber, select committees are likely to suffer.*



Dame Anne Begg opens the Work and Pensions Committee's Disability Roundtable in 2011. Photo: [UK Parliament](#) via [Catherine Bebbington/parliamentary copyright](#)

Everyone loves Select Committees^[1]. The House of Commons Reform Committee reported in 2009 that they had received 'universal praise', John Bercow has described them as 'pivotal players in politics', and a key conclusion of the Liaison Committee's 2015 Legacy Report was that 'public opinion, commentators and academic critics have all recognised that Select Committee work is the most constructive and productive aspect of Parliament'.

Praise for select committees has perhaps become even more effusive since they underwent reform in 2010 as a result of the recommendations of the Wright Committee. Select committees have certainly gained a higher profile and, many claim, have become even more assertive and effective, to the extent that the 'Wright reforms' have been described by Hagelund and Goddard as 'the most significant change to the way that the House operates in 30 years'. Ian Marsh has hailed Select Committees as a '[newly emboldened](#)' and '[empowered system](#)', BBC Parliamentary correspondent Mark d'Arcy described the post-Wright SC system as '[more powerful and independent-minded than ever before](#)', and Sir Richard Ottaway, former Chair of Foreign Affairs Select Committee, said that the 2010–2015 Parliament would be remembered as 'the Parliament of the Select Committee'.

Our [research](#) is concerned with measuring select committee effectiveness and, in doing so, considering whether such praise for both select committees and the Wright Reforms is justified. Building on [earlier work](#), our most recent research, published in [Parliamentary Affairs](#), suggests – at least in regard to MPs' engagement with select committees – that perhaps it is not.

We examined MPs' engagement with select committees since the Wright Reforms by using proxy measures of attendance and turnover rates. Increasing attendance rates and decreasing turnover rates were, respectively, explicit and implicit aims of the Wright Committee in its desire to boost the select committee system and the vitality of Parliament. The Wright Committee proposed smaller committees and the introduction of chair and membership elections in order to, among other things, generate a greater sense of ownership and increased levels of attendance and participation. The Wright Committee also wrote of the need to incentivise and increase the commitment of select committee members, and highlighted the view that it is 'crucial to create a parliamentary career path focussed on select committee work'. High turnover would therefore suggest that MPs are not using committees to specialise and develop policy expertise, to pursue an explicitly parliamentary (rather than governmental or constituency-focused) orientation in their work, or to build a scrutiny-based parliamentary career.

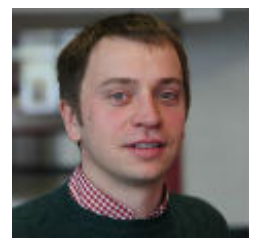
To explore attendance and turnover rates, we analysed select committee membership data taken from the [House of Commons Sessional Returns](#) between 1979 and 2016. Using interrupted time-series analyses, we found that there is little or no evidence that the introduction of the Wright reforms had any impact. Rather, our findings show that what affects attendance and turnover rates is the parliamentary cycle; attendance is at its highest at the beginning of a parliament, and turnover – when weighted to take into account the length of the parliamentary session – tends to be lower at the beginning and end of a parliament. There is as yet no statistical evidence that MPs were more engaged or involved with committees post-Wright, despite the many claims made about the higher status and significance of select committees following the reforms.

Indeed, despite what some have argued about the Wright reforms, it is perhaps unsurprising that the changes introduced in 2010 made little, if any, difference to these measures of membership engagement. The wider architecture of party and government in British parliamentary politics sets the parameters around what parliamentarians can do, and the Wright reforms could only ever modify this at the margins. There are thus a number of factors that militate against transformative change in the operation of the select committee system and engagement with it. For example, with regard to attendance and turnover rates, the size of the payroll vote impacts negatively upon the level of [electoral competition for chair positions](#) and membership, and select committee work is often incompatible with other parliamentary duties such as constituency case work, scrutiny of legislation and contributing to debates. All this suggests that further reform may be needed if all of the aims of the Wright Committee are to be better realised. At the very least, it suggests that fans of select committees and the Wright reforms should be more circumspect in their praise. On their own, the Wright reforms have not yet proved a sufficiently powerful mechanism to drive improvement of the select committee system, especially when it comes to membership engagement.

[1] Well, perhaps not [everyone](#).

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit.

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